

WHEN NATURE SPEAKS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, July 6, 2014

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Humanity Used to Be At the Center of the Universe

I'd like to start this sermon by pointing out a book by Joel Primak and Nancy Abrams called *The View from the Center of the Universe*. Published in 2006, it's a marvelous book with two views that I'd like to emphasize for the service today. Everybody knows that, at the time of Galileo and Copernicus, humanity envisioned itself as being at the center of the universe. Everything, including all the stars and the sun, revolved around us. Wherever a person lived, pretty much the rest of human culture revolved around that place, and whatever was going on in a person's life, all events revolved around that one person. In its time, this outlook was extraordinarily egocentric.

The first half of the book is about the ways in which we primitively viewed ourselves as being at the center of the universe. Then, of course, realizing with Galileo and Copernicus that this was not really true, we underwent the hard reality of coming to know that we circle the sun rather than the other way around. In terms of psychology, the hard part is that we were displaced as being at the center of the universe, and we didn't like it. So we resisted the new astronomy, and we used the church to work against it, which it did very willingly.

Humanity Still *Is* at the Center In Density, Size, Time, and Brain

However, the second half of the book talks about other ways – ways that we probably never thought about – in which we *are* at the center of the universe. Here are four examples, starting with the least important and moving toward the most important:

- A. In Terms of Density.** If one were to compare the density of empty space with the density of a black hole, the human body is right in the middle. This then allows us all sorts of freedoms, all sorts of abilities that otherwise we wouldn't have.

- B. In Terms of Size.** If one were to envision the size of a photon or something going on inside an atom and take that measurement to the negative 12 meters, for example, and then compare it to the size of, say, the Virgo supercluster, the cluster of galaxies of which the Milky Way is a part, what kind of measuring stick would you need on that scale?

So you compare that scale to the subatomic one, and the human being – the very shortest of us is about one meter, the very tallest of us is around two meters – ends up being exactly in the center of this scale, which then ends up having incredibly important consequences for us.

C. In Terms of Time. If you consider an atom that is cooling, and in the process of cooling, one of the electrons goes from one orbit to a lower orbit and sends off a photon, how much time does that take? Just shy of an instant. Ten to the negative 20 seconds or something like that – unbelievably fast. And then you compare it to the frame of geologic time. A million years, a billion years, fourteen billion years. The age, more or less, of the universe.

And what happens to us in terms of seconds? Or minutes, or hours, or days? Our life span is on the order of four times ten to the seven minutes. That's how many we get, on average, in our lifetime. About 30,000 days or so. And it's right in the middle of the spectrum from subatomic to geologic time. But here's where it becomes very important. So we've briefly seen the examples of density, size and time, and now we put them together in the human brain.

D. In Terms of the Human Brain. If you envision the human brain, it's about the size of a softball, more or less, not really a volleyball, not really a baseball, but more like a softball. The limiting factor on our ability to think has to do with how fast neurons can fire back and forth across the space of a softball. And so, if you were to imagine a brain the size of a car, wouldn't it be just a whole ton smarter?

It turns out that the answer is no. A car-size brain might very well have a deep thought, but the amount of time it takes for the neurons to fire from this side to that side and bounce around in the center for a while and then go up and down and all around for a bit would take a day before the brain ever had a chance to express its deep thought.

Very tiny brains can do marvelous things. A dragon fly is one of the most extraordinary fliers that exist, but it operates with a very tiny brain that has almost no memory. Thus it doesn't devote any time to memory but just to its flying and vision skills.

A brain the size of this sanctuary, for another example, might very well have a deep thought, but it would take a year and maybe even a hundred years before the neurons firing around over those long distances would ever be able to say what its deep thought was. And because of space and time being right at the center of these spectrums, humanity, according to the authors, is about as smart as it's capable of being as a biological entity.

And so Primak and Abrams write about these matters in their book. I found it fascinating, and I wanted to share it with you.

In Terms of Intrinsic Reality, There Is Only “Now”

But what I really wanted to talk about this morning is that, in considering our spiritual health, not our physical health, not our mental health necessarily, but our spiritual health, few things are as important as our apprehension of time. Let me try to persuade you of this. Of all the spiritual literature out there that deals with such a topic, two conclusions come to bear on it:

- 1. In Terms of Intrinsic Reality,** humanity really has only “now.” The past exists in our mind; so does the future. But they do not exist at the same level of reality as our present moment. Our present moment – “now” – is really at a different level of reality than the past or the future. It’s really all we have.
- 2. There Are a Lot of “Nows.”** As a matter of fact, “now” is continuous. We exist all the time in the present moment, and not recognizing this fact is very unhealthy. Living in the past leads to all sorts of mental issues, depression being one among them. Living in the future, where all of one’s attention is directed, can make a person extraordinarily apprehensive, consumed by anxiety, blood-pressure issues, and needing antacids all the time. Living in the present moment is the precious “now.” It is the healthiest outlook, generally speaking, for all of us. And so here are three aspects of what nature can teach us about living healthily in the “now.”

“A Rock, a River, a Tree”

I have borrowed three lessons from nature from Maya Angelou. She died on May 28, and I have wanted to give her more of her due one Sunday this summer. Today is the day, and so I’d like to conclude my sermon this morning with one of her famous poems, called “A Rock, a River, and a Tree.” I’ll get to that in a moment. She has in that poem the notions of a rock, a river, and a tree. These are archetypes that can teach us much about how to live if we pay attention to their lessons. So I want to talk very briefly about these three concepts:

- a. A Rock.** The first time I ever had a deep thought about a rock was when my family and I, along with two other couples, decided to spend the day at the Robert Tremaine State Park. It’s in southeastern New York, and in part of that park, a large, beautiful park, there’s a glacial moraine. The glacier had come from Canada during the previous ice age, and it moved down past the Adirondacks, past Syracuse, past Portland, all the way to its end point in this park, pushing boulders along the way. The moraine consists of maybe five acres’ worth of boulders, small ones the size of bushel baskets, tucked down

underneath larger ones – big ones, a lot of them the size of a car, and huge ones, the size of small houses. All of them rounded, all of them covered with very annoying graffiti.

I'm sitting on one of the car-size boulders, looking at the graffiti, and they caused me to wonder how long it would be before the defacing by thoughtless humans wears away and is gone. Then I started to think about the boulder I was sitting on. One of the plaques in the park says that some of the boulders are from Canada; some of them are from the Adirondacks or elsewhere. And they're all rounded. I don't know if you've ever dealt with granite, but it's extremely hard. Yet these had all been rounded down as they traveled all the way from Canada, and they were smoothed out so that you could sit on them. Now, they're pretty much spherical.

There's a lesson of time here. This happened maybe in the previous ice age or in the ice age before that. Ten thousand, thirty thousand, or forty thousand years ago. Then I learned that granite wears away at an inch per ten thousand years, or a tenth of an inch per thousand years. This means that a layer of paint will wear away a couple hundred years from now. That's how long we'll have to wait before the paint goes away.

- b. A River.** At the same time, I learned that a grain of sand in the bottom of a river travels a mile per hundred years. So if you were to mark a grain of sand on the bottom of some stream or river and follow it over the course of your lifetime and a lifetime after you, pretty much a mile down the road is where it would be in a hundred years.

Angelou writes about a rock; she also talks about a river. I won't say too much about a river. I think all of you have had the experience of sitting by a river and pondering the way in which the water probably came from the Pacific, was evaporated by the sun over the South Pacific, and then hit the land mass and turned into clouds. Some of it soaked into the grass, some of it watered the trees, some of it found its way to a lake, where it would stay there for a while, and most of it ended up in a river and flows down into the Mississippi or the Chesapeake or the Gulf of Mexico. And it repeats the cycle. You're just sitting there by a river that looks the same but is ever-changing.

It gives you a sense of time, of eternity, of flow, of the years, of the ages, of energy. And then she talks about a tree in the poem that follows this sermon.

- c. A Tree.** I had a very emotional experience last week. I was raised in one of those subdivisions that looks as though it had come straight out of the 50's. Ranch-style houses, and when the developers created the neighborhood, they brought in bulldozers and clear-cut all of it. Makes it easier to build the houses. My dad bought one of these lots, about three-quarters of an acre for a ranch-style house, but there was an older tree on

this lot, and my dad said, “Leave that tree alone. The others are history, but leave that tree alone.” It was probably 40 or 50 years old, a silver maple, so it’s a soft kind of maple. It doesn’t last as long as the hard-rock maple, which can live to be 300-400 years old. For silver maples, 100 years is about it.

I climbed on that tree in my backyard as a little kid, along with all my friends. One of my friends broke his arm when he fell out of the tree. We sold the house to a family with a pair of teenage kids, and they climbed on this tree. Eventually the tree died, and the trunk of it was in the backyard. When they counted the rings on it, it proved to be just over a hundred years old. It had gotten termites, and branches started to fall. One of them hit the house, took out the gutter. Another one landed on a fence that’s around the garden, took out the fence. Big branches, as you might imagine. A hundred years old for that tree.

A Reminder of the Expanse of Time

Psalm 90 that Janet read for the scripture lesson has this line, “Even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.” And that word, “everlasting,” is one that I’ve spoken of before. It’s the word, “olam,” meaning universe, cosmos, world, infinity, eternity – all of these translations, although combined they are an even better translation for the word “olam.” “From olam to olam thou art God.” The final sentence of the text that Janet read is this, “Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.”

And that’s what I’m trying to do today, to remind you of the expanse of time. But *you* have four times ten to the seven minutes. So apply your hearts unto wisdom.

Ezekiel’s promise was that the mountain in your midst, around which you live, shall not move and you shall be blessed forever. And then he writes about the river flowing out from the temple that waters the earth. He’s speaking in allegory, that it gives life to the earth. And the fruit shall be for your food and the leaves for your healing. “And like the eagle in the uppermost branches of the cedar, planted them near the temple and grows out and puts down its roots, and is a blessing upon the people forever.”

“Lord thou hast been our dwelling place even from everlasting to everlasting. Therefore be at peace.”

Amen.

Now I'd like to read that poem by Maya Angelou. And one other quote that I just came across yesterday that I would like to remind you of before I read the poem. From Karl Jung: He says, "A symbolic work is a perpetual challenge to our thoughts and feelings. Because even if we know what the symbols are, they are bridges thrown out toward an unseen shore."

A ROCK, A RIVER, A TREE

Maya Angelou

Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon.

The dinosaur, who left dry tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor,
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my
Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow.

I will give you no more hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than
the angels, have crouched too long in
the bruising darkness,
Have lain too long
Face down in ignorance.

Your mouths spilling words
Armed for slaughter.

The Rock cries out today, you may stand on me,
But do not hide your face.

Across the wall of the world,

A River sings a beautiful song,
Come rest here by my side.

Each of you a bordered country,
Delicate and strangely made proud,
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.

Your armed struggles for profit
Have left collars of waste upon
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.

Yet, today I call you to my riverside,
If you will study war no more. Come,
Clad in peace and I will sing the songs
The Creator gave to me when I and the
Tree and the stone were one.

Before cynicism was a bloody scar across your
Brow and when you yet knew you still
Knew nothing.

The River sings and sings on.

There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing River and the wise Rock.

So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,
The African and Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the Tree.

Today, the first and last of every Tree
Speaks to Humankind. Come to me, here beside the River.

Plant yourself beside me, here beside the River.

Each of you, descendant of some passed-
On traveller, has been paid for.

You, who gave me my first name, you
Pawnee, Apache and Seneca, you
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then
Forced on bloody feet, left me to the employment of
Other seekers – desperate for gain,
Starving for gold.

You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot...
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought
Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare
Praying for a dream.

Here, root yourselves beside me.

I am the Tree planted by the River,
Which will not be moved.

I the Rock, I the River, I the Tree,
I am yours – your Passages have been paid.

Lift up your faces, You have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.

History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you.

Give birth again
To the dream.

Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands.

Mold it into the shape of your most

Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.
Lift up your hearts
Each new hour holds new chances
For new beginnings.

Do not be wedded forever
To fear, yoked eternally
To brutishness.

The horizon leans forward,
Offering you space to place new steps of change.
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
You may have the courage
To look up and out upon me, the
Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.

No less to Midas than the mendicant.

No less to you now than the mastodon then.

Here on the pulse of this new day
You may have the grace to look up and out
And into your sister's eyes, into
Your brother's face, your country
And say simply
Very simply
With hope
Good morning.

Amen.